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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

October 9, 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Couve de Murville

I attach a State Department paper which urges that you concentrate on general problems of Europe and Africa. What the paper says is sensible, but it hardly seems to hit the real issues.

The heart of our problem with the French is that de Gaulle is playing a lone hand. This shows up all over the world, but it is most dangerous in Europe, and especially with respect to a Berlin crisis. If you choose to press Couve, the following are among the legitimate comments you might make:

1. The contingency planning for a crisis is most inadequate, whether we think of day-to-day difficulties in West Berlin or a major test of access rights. This is partly because political agreement has been withheld at critical points and partly because we have neither unified command nor effective political reaction time, except in the very limited case of air access planning.
2. The French Government has been particularly slow in its response to planning problems and sticky in its unwillingness to delegate authority to the man on-the-spot. Some examples follow:
 - a. Tripartite contingency planning within the city of Berlin has come to a virtual halt because of the inability of the French Commandant to participate in these exercises. Either he is under instructions not to participate, or he has no instructions permitting participation. Either way, the situation is most unsatisfactory.
 - b. The French Government still stands apart from even the limited advance authority which London and Washington have given General Norstad in the matter of air access. The French are not signed on, for example, to an authority for substituting military for civilian crews, or to an authority for fighter escort. General Norstad's experience last spring makes it clear that the commander on the spot must be trusted with this kind of discretion.

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(page 1 of 3 pages)

Oct. 9, 1962

c. The discussion of tactics in reply to a Khrushchev appearance in the UN has been obstructed by French reluctance to discuss anything relating to the UN. Whether we like it or not, the UN is a possible battleground, and it is ridiculous not to get into a strong preparatory posture on this point. The French member of the Ambassadorial group, as late as last week, was operating without instructions on this topic.

d. The French military build-up is surprisingly feeble and can hardly carry conviction of French seriousness to Khrushchev. Even when the French had four divisions committed to NATO, their contribution was lower, proportionately, than might have been expected of so central a power. Now it is clear that the French only plan to have two divisions in Germany, holding the rest in France as "National M-Day Forces." If France proposes to play a full role in the defense of Berlin and the defense of Germany, these targets are absurdly low. If France means to leave these matters to the United States, then at a moment of crisis, the United States may have to act alone.

e. If you want to turn the screw, you might remind him that at one point in the quite small exercise on banning armed personnel carriers, the French were entirely unable to respond because both President de Gaulle and Couve were on tour in Germany and no one else had authority to speak.

3. You might want to say that your own preference would be for intense cooperation and close coordination, leading to effective, rapid and convincing response to any Soviet challenges. What astonishes you in the French posture is that when you talked with de Gaulle in Paris, he appeared to have exactly the same view. Now, as a serious crisis approaches, you are considering one last great effort to improve the performance of the alliance, and you may be communicating directly with General de Gaulle on this point. But whether or not such agreement can be obtained, the United States, for its part, means to take all the necessary actions for the defense of Berlin.

P. S. I have not mentioned, but you may want to, the French coolness toward the ICJ decision on UN costs. Couve is a cynic about the UN, but it might not hurt to point out that in cold terms of national interest a better French position on this issue would be most productive -- especially in Franco-American relations.

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(page 2 of 3 pages)

Oct. 9, 1962

P. P. S. You might wish to remind Couve of the problem of Laos and our interest in France's doing its share to support the costs of the aid program.

McGeorge Bundy

Attachments:

- Tab A - Memo from the State Department
- Tab B - Memo of conversation between Rusk and Couve
- Tab C - Intelligence report on French UN position
- Tab D - A cable showing a typical French response on contingency planning